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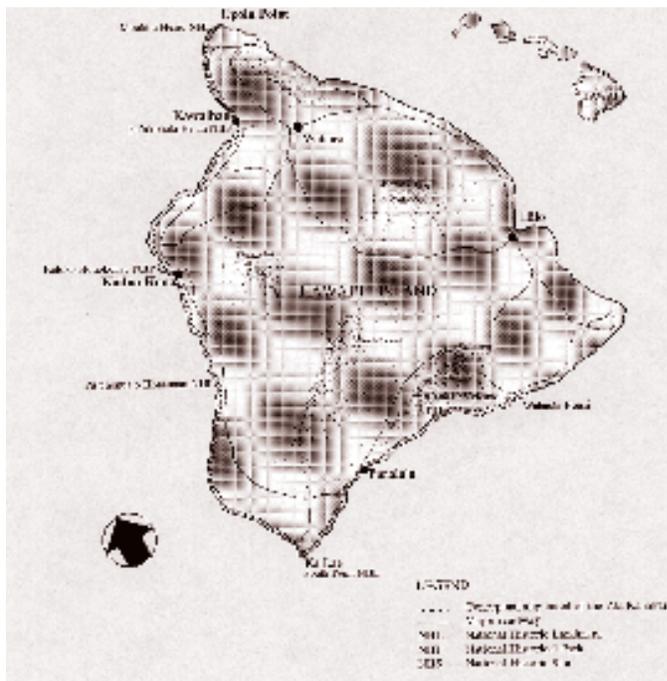
Determining Significance Hawai'i's Ala Kahakai

Hawai'i Island, showing the route of the Ala Kahakai from Upolu Point to Wahaula Heiau.

Introduced by Senator Daniel Akaka and approved by Congress in 1992, P.L. 120-461 authorizes a feasibility study of the Ala Kahakai (Trail by the Sea) for possible designation as a National Historic Trail. The Ala Kahakai is unique: so far no other trail proposed for the National Trails System offers such archeological potential as well as scenic beauty. The 175-mile trail passes through nine existing or proposed state parks, and four national parks. Hundreds (if not thousands) of sensitive and fragile historic properties and features, located on county, private, and Hawaiian trust lands, are associated with the trail and contribute to its significance.

If the Trail becomes part of the National Trails System, land managers, planners, preservationists and Native Hawaiians will be faced with multiple challenges: assessing the significance of the Trail and its contributing resources under both the criteria for national historic trails and the National Register of Historic Places (36 CFR 60.4); an environmental assessment of alternatives for trail recognition; and a management plan for the protection and interpretation of the trail and its associated historic properties.

Trail at Mauna Lani. Photo courtesy NPS.



Polynesians successfully colonized the Hawaiian archipelago by about 400-500 A.D. Within 500 years, all the main islands were sparsely populated. The age of the ancient trail system, however, is uncertain. The west coast or leeward side of Hawai'i Island was probably frequented early for fishing and the gathering of resources, but permanent settlement (based on archeological evidence) probably did not occur until 900 or 1000 AD, by which time a coastal trail would have developed. With island unification in the 1400s (if not as early as the 1200s or 1300s when districts already tended to be polities) the system of coastal and connecting inland trails probably approximated its historically-known form (Cordy 1994:2).

At European contact in 1779, the island kingdom of Hawai'i was one of four kingdoms in the Hawaiian archipelago—the others being Maui, O'ahu, and Kaua'i. Hawai'i had a ruler and high chiefs, lesser chiefs (all nobles, or *ali'i*) and commoners (*maka'āinana*). By 1795, when Kamehameha I had conquered all the islands save Ni'ihau and Kaua'i, his kingdom included at least 300,000 people (Cordy 1994:2).

The Hawaiian political system was complex—probably larger and more hierarchal than any native system that developed in the mainland United States. It included elaborate respect behavior in the form of the strict *Kapu* system which separated the elite from the commoners and defined relations between them; a feudal land holding system with a hierarchy of overlords controlling the community lands (*ahupua'a*); a religious system with priestly orders and many types

of temples (*heiau*), at least one of which, the massive *luakini* or war temple dedicated to the war god Kū, required periodic human sacrifices; and a ruler at the pinnacle of both the secular and the religious systems (Cordy 1994:2).

The Trail Today

The Ala Kahakai is a 175-mile portion of the ancient coastal *ala loa* extending from `Upolu Point on the north tip of Hawai'i Island down the west coast of the island around Ka Lae (in the South Point National Historic Landmark) to the east boundary of Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park at the ancient shoreline temple known as Waha'ula Heiau. The term "*ala loa*" is taken from the writings of the traditional culture historian David Malo (1951:17) who said, "When a road passed around the circumference of the island, it was called the *ala loa*." (In this article the terms Ala Kahakai and *ala loa* are used interchangeably.)

"Ala Kahakai" is a conceptual designation coined for planning purposes and as a focal point around which advocacy groups, such as E Mau Nā Ala Hele rally for the preservation of Hawaiian trail systems (State of Hawaii, 1991).

The ancient *ala loa* circumscribed the entire island. It was a twisting single-file footpath, as opposed to later historic trails which were both wider and straighter, and located further inland. In some areas, the trail went up ridges and down valleys and was set back by coastal cliffs, including short bypasses by canoe where land barriers existed. In soil and sand areas, the trail often had no stone-work and was simply a trodden path. On smooth *pāhoehoe* (billowy lava) flows with little soil, the trail might appear as a worn depression in the lava. On rougher *a`ā* (clinker lava) flows, the trail was usually visible as a crushed path. Sometimes waterworn steppingstones were set into the path to make walking easier. Stone cairns and coral fragments sometimes marked trail segments (Cordy 1994:8).

In order to accommodate horses, introduced to Hawai'i Island in 1803, curbstones were added to some prehistoric trails and in a few cases, the trail was widened where terrain permitted (Apple, 1965: Appendix 2). With horses becoming more numerous after 1840, new trails with curbstones were designed specifically for horse traffic. These were

straighter, cutting off many former coastal settlements, and accommodated two horses abreast. By the early 1900s, further trail modifications and realignments were made to accommodate wheeled vehicles, first carts and carriages, and later cars and jeeps. Parts of the *ala loa* continued in use throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. The Ala Kahakai today combines elements of the surviving *ala loa* with later historic government trails that developed parallel to the ancient route, or that in some cases, were constructed over original trail segments.

Significance of the Trail

Throughout the years of prehistory and much of the 1800s, transportation and communication within the Hawaiian kingdom were by canoe and by major trails. The *ala loa* linked the 600 communities or land units (*ahupua`a*) of the kingdom's six districts on Hawai'i Island: Kohala, Kona, Ka`ū, Puna, Hilo, and Hāmākua (Cordy 1994:2).

An *ahupua`a*, the basic unit in Hawaiian socio-economic organization, was a narrow land division usually extending from the mountains to the sea, cross-cutting all environmental zones. This provided residents with equal access via coast-inland trails to the necessities of survival: the bounty of the sea, the harvest of inland gardens, and products from the forested uplands. Hawaiian settlement patterns, however, tended to be dispersed along the coastline.

The Trail was associated with the many population centers of the island, nearly all the royal centers and most of the major temples, with battlefields and the movement of armies, and with annual taxation. Although used by commoners within their own *ahupua`a*, the *ala loa* served primarily as one of the major avenues for the rulers and chiefs to send messages, to gather intelligence, and to travel about the kingdom. Messengers (*kukini*) were sent out to call in other chiefs for meetings, to call for tribute, to gather in laborers to build public works projects such as temples, to spy on rival chiefs, and to summon warriors to battle. The *kukini* were elite warrior-athletes, often of chiefly descent, who were selected to undergo rigorous physical and mental training (Malo 1951:219-220).

The *ala loa* was traveled annually by nobles and priests (*ali`i*) carrying symbols of the god, Lono, during the *Makahiki*, a 4-month-long festival (from October-November to January-February) that uniquely integrated ancient Hawaiian religion, politics, economics, and recreation. In the first month, the annual tribute was gathered from the *ahupua`a* lands around the island. A long wooden image of Lono who symbolized peace and fertility was borne clockwise around the island in 23 days, accompanied by priests, attendants, and athletes

Konane—ancient Hawaiian game similar to checkers. Many playing surfaces are found along the trail.





Trail worn down into lava from foot traffic over centuries.

for associated athletic events. The procession halted at the altar of each *ahupua`a* (the *ahupua`a* shrine). In each land unit, the *konohiki* (resident low chief who controlled the land for an overlord) assembled the tribute (feathers, pigs, chickens, bark cloth, and bundles of taro) near the *ahupua`a* altar. If the tribute was acceptable, a priest performed appropriate rituals and the procession moved on (Malo 1951:146; Cordy 1994:5).

Tradition provides the names of many rulers and events in prehistory that are associated with the *ala loa*; however, that portion of the ancient trail traversing the west coast of Hawai`i Island was particularly significant between the years 1779 and 1820, as the scene of a dramatic series of events that had lasting consequences for Hawaiian culture: Captain's Cook's fateful landing and subsequent death at Kealekekua Bay in 1779; Kamehameha I's rise to power and consolidation of the Hawaiian Islands under monarchical rule; the death of Kamehameha I at Kailua in 1819, followed by the overthrow of the national religious system; and finally, the arrival in Kona of the first Western missionaries in 1820.

Trail Resources

The corridor of the Ala Kahakai—it's cultural landscape—abounds with distinctive Polynesian-Hawaiian properties that have no counterpart on the U.S. mainland. Foundations of long abandoned fishing settlements and gardening terraces; ancient *ku`ula* (coastal temples dedicated to the fishing gods); a wide variety of *heiau* (temple platforms), some with associated *pu`uhonua* (places of refuge for women, children, and the elderly during war, or those fleeing punishment); *hōlua* slides (long inclined basalt tracks on which the *ali`i* competitively raced on narrow wooden sleds to test their courage and skill); *papamū* (stone grid-like surfaces etched with holes on which *kōnane*, an ancient game resembling checkers, was played); and numerous petroglyph sites are mute testimony to the *ali`i* travelers, priests, and messengers who

trod this route for political ends, pausing here and there for rest and relaxation, and to the simple fishermen who paid homage to the god of the sea.

The Trail also skirts lagoons where the ancient Hawaiians practiced aquaculture. Some were natural inland ponds, or isolated shore ponds formed by a barrier beach parallel to the coast. The most spectacular fishponds, however, were the *loko kuapa* which consisted of great mortarless seawalls constructed of volcanic basalt and coral to enclose natural lagoons. Walled ponds were major engineering feats as well as symbols of chiefly power; most, in fact, were associated with chiefly residential complexes where they provided an important source of food, usually *`anae* (mullet) and *awa* (milkfish) for the chiefs and nobles. A few ponds have been revitalized, but many others have been partially destroyed by lava flows and *tsunamis* (tidal waves). Today, some ponds are habitats for endangered species of birds, shrimp, and native plants.

The royal centers of the kingdom nearly all lay along the *ala loa*—at Waipi`o in Hāmākua; Punalu`u in Ka`ū; Hōnaunau, Kealakekua, Kahalu`u, and Hōlualoa and Kailua in Kona; and Kawaihae and Kāpakai (near `Upolu Point) in Kohala. Their rulers played pivotal roles in Hawaii's political evolution from a complex chiefdom, to a monarchy, and eventually a modern state. In addition to the residences of the king and high chiefs, these centers each had major sacrificial temples (*luakini*), refuge areas (*pu`uhonua*), sporting grounds, and (in two cases) royal mausoleums (the Hale o Līloa in Waipi`o and Hale o Keawe in Hōnaunau). Several larger *heiau* and chiefs' complexes are designated National Historic Landmarks: Mo`okini Heiau at `Upolu Point, Pu`ukoholā at Kawaihae, and in Kona, Kaloko-Honokōhau NHP, Kamakahonu and the `Ahu`ena Heiau, and Pu`uhonua o Hōnaunau NHP. Larger populations were focused around the royal centers and chiefs' residences. One contrast noted in the literature of the 1800s was the difference between life at the courts versus rural life. The *ala loa* connected these extremes of Hawaiian life (Cordy 1994:4).

Other resources pertain to the historic period with cattle and sugar landings, old harbors and railroad beds, donkey trails, and tumbled down houses and churches. Still other segments of the Ala Kahakai pass through or by present day modifications to the coastal landscape: boat harbors, airports, luxury resorts, and towns.

Recognition, Ownership, Access

Significant sections of the prehistoric trail remain. That the potential exists for recreational trail links which would make a continuous Ala Kahakai was illustrated on National Trails Day in

1993 when nearly the entire trail route was hiked. Over one-half of the 175 miles proposed for national historic trail designation is in local, state, or federal land management. Some 9% has public access easements or dedications. Another 20% in private hands is defined as “ancient trails” (State of Hawaii, Highways Act of 1892), which, in Hawaiian governance, means these trails are open for use of the people within an *ahupua'a*. The 1892 Act protects the right of public access to these lands.

Interpretation and Protection

Trails link past and present experiences, creating the potential for a deeper appreciation of our history and environment beyond what the interpretation of individual sites can afford. The Ala Kahakai tells the complete story of island settlement, cultural evolution, and governance. It links natural resources (scenic values, trade and commerce, subsistence and resource procurement, etc.) and cultural resources (historic events, sites, and sacred/spiritual values).

Hawaii has strong historic preservation laws as well as a commitment to meaningful involvement of Native Hawaiians in the management of cultural resources. Planning for the protection and interpretation of a national historic trail, therefore, presents partnership opportunities among state, local, and federal agencies and the private landowners. Trail designation implies added public access to cultural and natural resources, which in turn increases the potential for adverse impacts to the resources. Many areas along the Trail are, in fact, still remote and poorly known archeologically. Therefore, prior to opening the Trail to full public access, environmental assessments must be written and approved; boundaries for the Trail corridor must be established; complete cultural resources inventories, especially of highly significant traditional cultural properties, must be undertaken; and a management plan be developed as required by the National Trails System Act and Hawaiian his-

Stepping stones removed from trail.

Ala Kahakai, Mauna Lani. Photo courtesy NPS.



toric preservation law (Chapter 6E, Hawaii Revised Statutes).

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Unless otherwise noted, photos were taken by members and friends of E Mau Nā Ala Hele on National Trails Day, June 1993.